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Nonhuman Agency and Gender: An Ecofeminist Critique of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract:

This paper undertakes an ecofeminist critique of American nature literature through an analysis of Ernest Hemingway's 1952 novella The Old Man and the Sea. It uncovers the protagonist Santiago's derogatory perception of nonhuman space and nonhuman beings as well as the complicity of this perception with the patriarchal discourse interpellated by him. The text enacts a constant struggle between the active agency of the nonhuman beings and Santiago's repetitive attempt to label them. The Old Man and the Sea can be read as a critique of the masculinist impulse to dominate nature. Santiago's worldview, groomed by patriarchy and anthropocentrism, fails to contain the complexity and autonomous agency of the nonhuman world around him. His journey reveals not the triumph of man over nature, but the inevitable unravelling of such a delusion. The sea, the marlin, the birds, and even the sharks assert their own agencies, refusing to be mere backdrops to Santiago's quest. In doing so, the narrative echoes ecofeminist calls to rethink humanity's relationship with the natural world, urging a move away from conquest and control toward humility and interconnection. This paper highlights Santiago's biases, the challenges offered to them by the nonhuman beings and the ensuing ambiguity in him. It shows how the nonhuman space can work to unravel the complexities in human life and the ecosystem and jettison a balanced lifestyle.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Gender, Masculinity, Nonhuman, Agency.

Introduction

The Adivasi Will Not Dance is a collection of short stories published in 2015 by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, a writer and government doctor from Jharkhand. Ethnically, he belongs

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to the Santhal tribe which is reflected in the tapestry of his works. This is the author's second Henry James describes the twentieth-century novel as a "house of fiction [which] has . . . not one window, but a million . . . every one of which has been pierced . . . by the need of the individual vision . . ." (1934, p. 46). This "many-mansioned" house of fiction catapults an escape from the prison house of bias (Hale, 2009, p. 20). Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* has been interpreted through a masculinist lens, with the protagonist Santiago often cast as a stoic hero embodying strength, endurance, and dominance over nature. However, an ecofeminist critique reveals that the narrator subtly undercuts Santiago's narrative by highlighting the limits of his anthropocentric and patriarchal biases. Drawing on ecofeminist theory, this paper examines how the protagonist's masculinist gaze, which seeks to dominate nonhuman beings, is continually resisted and destabilized by their autonomous agency.

1. An Ecofeminist Reading of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

In her essay "Ecofeminist Literary Criticism", Gretchen T. Legler writes: "*Ecofeminists* argue that dealing with practical environmental problems . . . is both an ecological and a feminist task because the uses and abuses of the environment that have led to . . . the potentially catastrophic present are largely due to a patriarchal environmental ethic that has conceptualized [the nonhuman space] as 'woman'" (1997, pp. 227–228). This feminized conceptualization maintains not only this harmful "patriarchal environmental ethic", but also maintains "hierarchical ways of thinking that justify the oppression of various 'others' in patriarchal culture" (Legler, 1997, p. 228). To elaborate, ecofeminist criticism critiques feminized perceptions of the nonhuman space and nonhuman beings because it triggers a derogatory perception of the environment as well as a derogatory perception of women and othered subalterns in society. Ecofeminists argue that constructions of nature as female are important to the maintenance of the patriarchal environmental ethic and hence suggest reimagining nature and relationships between humans and the nonhuman world in order to eliminate such forms of institutional oppression.

One of the ways in which ecofeminists critique these patriarchal perceptions is by analyzing "the canon of . . . American nature literature." (Legler, 1997, p. 228). This paper undertakes such a critique of American nature literature through an analysis of Hemingway's novella *The Old Man and the* Sea. It uncovers the protagonist Santiago's derogatory perception of nonhuman space and nonhuman beings as well as the complicity of this perception with the patriarchal discourse interpellated by him. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago perceived the nonhuman space around him through a dominant, masculinist lens. In other words, he labelled the ocean and sea animals in feminine and derogatory terms. However, the narrator emphasizes how these nonhuman beings display complete independence of his labels. Hemingway's portrayal of these beings defines them as volatile beings indifferent to Santiago's masculinist gaze and actively potent beyond his petty opinions and stereotypes. Their autonomous agency serves to counter his derogatory gaze and complete the course of this ecofeminist critique. This allows Hemingway's text to be interpreted as a double-voiced discourse. The text enacts a constant struggle between the active agency of the nonhuman beings and Santiago's repetitive attempt to label them.

2. Fishing and the Performance of Masculinity

To understand this struggle, it is inevitable to determine the socio-historical position of Santiago which led him to practice labelling. Santiago's profession as a fisherman further entrenches his masculinist worldview, as it is both culturally inherited and identity-defining. He had been taught to behave in a normatively masculine manner in his personal and professional life. He occupied an ascribed social position, having inherited the profession of fishing not through personal achievement or choice, but through cultural and familial

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expectation. At one point, he pondered, "Perhaps I should not have been a fisherman", then he reassured himself by thinking, "But that was the thing I was born for" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 37). He could not question his fate beyond this, but accepted it as what he ought to do. He had accepted fishing as his profession because his ancestors had accepted it as their means of survival. Hence, his skill for fishing had been acquired as a means to survive; it had never been a matter of choice. That is why he had to constantly remind himself to even psychologically constrain his thoughts and "think of only one thing" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 28). In other words, fishing had been authoritatively interpellated into his life so fervently that he could not even think beyond its discourse.

As a hegemonic and professional discourse, fishing was additionally complicit with Santiago's discourse of masculinity. This complicity can be discerned from the influence of the masculinist discourse on his little friend, referred to as "the boy" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 4) or "Manolin" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 17). Manolin always attempted to behave in a masculine way, even though he was a small boy. He was expected to learn fishing despite his age and inevitably had to learn to perform masculinity. When Santiago felt sorry for waking Manolin early to fish, the boy reassured him, saying, "It is what a man must do" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 17). This assertion proves how fraught the discourses of fishing (profession) and masculinity (gender) had been for both Santiago and Manolin.

3. The Ocean and the Man-of-War Bird

Santiago found it inevitable to fish and perform his masculinity simultaneously. This meant he could not fish without inflicting a gendered, masculinist gaze on the nonhuman space and nonhuman beings. The first and most essential time he inflicts this gaze on the nonhuman space is when he labels the ocean as "*la mar*" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 19). The narrator informs us that he always perceives the ocean "as feminine and as something that . . . did wild or wicked things . . . because she could not help them. The moon affects her as it does a woman, he thought" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 20). This information reveals that he perceived the ocean as performing what was considered feminine behaviour. He not only perceived the ocean as beautiful, but also delimited its potential and labelled it as synonymous with what he understood to be a woman who was always inconstant, like the moon. He simplified the unpredictable, volatile nature of the ocean by calling it a mere feminine woman who changes her course like the phases of the moon and is affected by her mood swings. He effeminizes the ocean to feel a sense of comfort while fishing since the acknowledgement of the autonomous and unpredictable agency of the ocean would decrease his courage and masculinity. Nevertheless, while he conceptualized the ocean as feminine, the actual surface of the ocean as described by the narrator, independent of his labels, was "flat except for the occasional swirls of the current" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 20). This narrative information reveals how the ocean, by its normal potentiality, resists his penetration and retraces it back to its source. In other words, his derogatory perception of the ocean reveals his biased gendered position, instead of his intended ability to deride the ocean.

Nevertheless, Santiago ignores the tendency of the ocean to surpass anthropomorphizing. Instead, by effeminizing the ocean, he behaves as though he had received a legitimate access to inflict his derogatory and gendered perception on nonhuman spaces and beings. Thereafter, he projects his sexual desires onto the nonhuman beings. The worst victim of his gaze was the man-of-war bird. The moment he noticed the "gelatinous bladder" of the bird as it swam on the surface of the ocean, he directed his perverted, masculinist gaze onto the bird by labeling it as a "whore" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 24). This example of labelling shows how quickly he could inflict his gendered gaze on the bird while fishing simultaneously (proving how complicitly fraught the discourses of gender and fishing were to him). Yet the

behaviour of the bird had been natural and carefree, surpassing his derogatory purview. The narrator elaborates that the bird had unknowingly floated near the boat and later "turned on its side" and "righted itself" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 24). After straightening itself, the bird had "floated" away "cheerfully as a bubble" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 24). The bird's behaviour seems in tandem with a natural course of refreshment. After floating upside-down, it straightened itself and floated away.

Santiago had labelled the man-of-war bird after it had moved away indifferently. It was unaware and unharmed by his derogatory comment "You whore" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 24). The comment mirrors his illicit sexual desires, which could not be controlled even at the mere sight of the sexual organ of a nonhuman being. His desires were perhaps more ardent as the bird's filaments were poisonous for human beings. So, if he wished to touch the man-of-war bird, he would have to suffer "welts and sores" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 25). That is why he sought morbid pleasure in watching the turtles eat the bird and its filaments. He took pleasure in stamping the bubbles these filaments made when he saw them on the shore after a storm. The narrator indicates how he "loved to walk on" these bubbles and "hear them pop when he stepped on them with the horny soles of his feet" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 25). This description conveys vivid tactile imagery. The word "horny" seems to convey dual meanings. It could refer to the hard and rough feet of Santiago as a tool of inflicting violence, as well as a phallic symbol allowing him to vent out his illicit sexual desires. Hence, the behaviour of Santiago towards the man-of-war bird reflects not only his masculinist performativity but also his sexual deviancy.

4. The Sharks and Santiago's Morbid Pleasure of Killing

Santiago also nurtures sexual deviancy by dreaming of porpoise mating and witnessing turtles' mating. He believed these turtles were "strange in their love-making" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 25). These mental perceptions reveal his tendency to misinterpret, maltreat and violate the nonhuman beings and nonhuman space around him. His tendency to inflict violence on nonhuman beings and derive morbid pleasure from it comes across through his behaviour with the sharks. The sharks that attack the marlin's carcass are described as hateful and ruinous by him. However, they were also simply doing what sharks do: feeding. After he had killed the marlin, it was inevitable for sharks to come towards the carcass because of the scent of its blood. But Santiago takes revenge on these sharks, as their natural course of behaviour clashed with his ability to safeguard the killed marlin. He doubted his ability to kill the first big shark because it could attack him out of its hunger. So, he hit the shark with his harpoon "with resolution and complete malignancy" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 79). Since his "malignancy" here was inseparable from his "resolution" to kill the shark, it might mean that he was feigning malignancy to feel courageous enough to kill the shark. This behaviour would then count as his performance of masculinity. However, the narrator gradually reveals that he had often enjoyed morbid pleasure in watching the dead sharks sink. He was "always fascinated" to "watch the big shark sinking slowly in the water, showing first life-size, then small, then tiny" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 87). This shows that his pleasure was not entirely undifferentiated from his performance of masculinity.

However, in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago is hardly allowed to enjoy pleasure entirely. He knew that he had "enjoyed killing" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 82) the first shark. Yet his perception of the shark's dynamic nature, which was "beautiful and noble and [knew] no fear" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 82), forced him into questioning his pleasure and masculinist performance. Suddenly, he felt that his performance and pleasure were immoral and incorrect. This shock forces him to assert a valid reason for killing the shark to free himself of any immoral guilt. Hence, he loudly asserts that he killed the shark "in self-defense" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 82). Yet, he could not separate this assertion from his simultaneous

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acceptance that he had "killed him well" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 82). Thus, while he tried to assert his action as just, he could not separate his pleasure-seeking tendency from this assertion. His acceptance of enjoying pleasure becomes problematic because, though he tried to validate it, he could not acknowledge the vanity and illicit nature of his pleasure. He tried to place his pleasurable murder of the shark within the ecological cycle of the food chain and perceive it as based on survival instinct. However, this attempt was impossible as the natural behaviour of the ecosystem is based on necessity, not pleasure. As he was unable to acknowledge this fact, his thought processes came across as ambiguous and inconclusive. Such an interpretation of his thoughts stemmed from the shark's dynamic agency, which allowed him to question himself, and the reader to question his/her thoughts. The sharks' tendency to repetitively attack the marlin also challenged his masculinist performance of going deep-sea fishing, with less precautions, at an old age and all alone. The sharks' dynamic agency thus forced him to question his over-ambiguous endeavour of killing the marlin and enabled him to ponder at—if not reconsider—its immorality and vanity.

5. The Marlin and Santiago's Masculine Assumptions

Santiago's behaviour towards the marlin once again reveals his pleasure-seeking tendency. But it also displays the correlation between his masculinist performances and his pleasure and pride, or the correlation between his profession and his instinctive opinions. His relationship with the marlin reflects a masculinist desire to assert dominance, even as the fish eludes full understanding. When he first hooks the marlin, Santiago calls it "brother" and expresses admiration for its strength and nobility (Hemingway, 2004, p. 44). This fraternal language complicates the dynamic—it is not pure antagonism—but the act remains one of violence and control. He must kill the fish to prove his worth, to be a man again in the eyes of the village. As he struggles with the marlin over three days, Santiago increasingly anthropomorphizes the creature, attributing to it courage, endurance, and even a kind of honour. Yet this very humanization reinforces a binary that aligns value with qualities Santiago sees in himself. The marlin is worthy not because it is a living being with its own place in the ecosystem, but because it mirrors Santiago's ideal of masculine heroism. While Hemingway does not explicitly critique Santiago's worldview, the narrative distance and detached tone subtly frame his perceptions as limited and, at times, delusional. The text offers subtle critiques of this logic. The marlin does not submit easily; it drags Santiago far out into the sea, asserting its own strength and agency. Even in death, it cannot be fully possessed—its body is devoured by sharks, leaving Santiago with nothing but a skeleton. The sea reclaims its creature, rendering Santiago's triumph hollow.

Santiago did not effeminize or harbour revenge towards the marlin. However, he certainly believed that by his masculinist performances, attained intelligence and experience, he could tame the marlin's "greatness" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 49) and persuade it into believing it was weaker. When he first saw the marlin, he was awestruck at its size. However, he convinces himself that he would kill the marlin "[i]n all his greatness and his glory" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 49). Here, he maintains the masculinity of the marlin and acknowledges his potential, but is determined to win over it. This determination stemmed from his need to perform "what a man can do and what a man endures" because he had to "prove" to the boy that he "was a strange old man" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 49). This assertion shows that his performance of masculinity had more to do with social approval than personal satisfaction. It also conveys that he struggled despite his old age to enact his masculinity. His masculinist performances and his determination, however, disillusion him. It allows him to assume that he could "convince" the marlin and therefore "kill him" (Hemingway, 2004, p. 66). This assumption reveals his misinterpretation that he could persuade the marlin to believe it was weaker than him and thereby kill it. By doing so, he misused his masculine position and underestimated the marlin's potential. However, the marlin was not just indifferent to

Santiago's disillusions; its behaviour also helps to uncover the emptiness of these disillusions and reveal the magnificent agency of nonhuman beings and nonhuman spaces. In his essay "The Spacious Foreground: Interpreting Simplicity and Ecocritical Ethics in *The Old Man and the Sea*", Alexander Hollenberg explains how Hemingway's novella reveals the limitations of an anthropocentric worldview, exposing the porous boundary between necessity and cruelty in Santiago's actions. Though Santiago views himself as engaged in a noble struggle, the marlin's destruction suggests otherwise. The fish becomes a sacrificial object in a ritual of masculine redemption, but one that ultimately fails to deliver.

6. The Warbler and the Marlin's Agency

Hollenberg's argument about the marlin is in conjunction with his explanation of the warbler's agency. He contends that the warbler comes to him "as a momentary respite from the antagonism between man and fish [i. e., the marlin]" (2015, p. 27). But the moment the warbler entered the narrative, it demanded attention. It sat in a carefree manner on Santiago's line and transformed the line "from an object designed to master and possess nature into a space of refuge" (Hollenberg, 2015, p. 27). Thus, the warbler converted a thing (here the line) which Santiago considered as masculine and powerful into a thing that could be used to allow comfort. However, Santiago anthropomorphized the warbler and spoke to it playfully by undermining its agency. However, "the bird works to challenge the fisherman's desire to imagine it as 'company'" (Hollenberg, 2015, p. 28). He had anthropomorphized the warbler, believing that it had come to him as "company" when he had been lonely. However, Hollenberg contends that the bird disallowed such a narrow perception. Santiago projects vulnerability onto the bird, seeing it as weak and needing rest, yet the bird soon flies off, following its own migratory path. Santiago's interpretation is tender but ultimately narrow—he cannot fully grasp the bird's life beyond his human frame of reference.

Hollenberg shows how the marlin supported the warbler in exposing its agency to Santiago. Hollenberg describes "immediately after" Santiago anthropomorphizes the warbler "the Marlin gives 'a sudden lurch that pull[s] the old man down on to the bow', reminding us that Santiago's way of seeing the world is fallible." (Hollenberg, 2015, p. 28). In this manner, Hollenberg believes that Hemingway "maintains the impenetrability of nonhuman interiority, and . . . underscores the limits of Santiago's interpretive gesture." (Hollenberg, 2015, p. 28). Simultaneously, Hollenberg argues that "such narrative patterning preserves the possibility of a responsive relationship (as opposed to an utter lack of correlation) between the human and nonhuman other". (Hollenberg, 2015, p. 28).

Conclusion

The above examples of the active marlin, the indifferent warbler, the sharks, the man-of-war bird, and the ocean ascertain Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* as a double-voiced discourse—reflecting not only Santiago's perspective but also the agency of the nonhuman beings and the ocean. He portrays the nonhuman beings in *The Old Man and the Sea* not as symbols—like in Herman Melville's *Moby*-Dick—but as real beings, which do not metaphorically stand for ideas but are active, potent creatures who reflect the importance of the ecosystem. Since Hemingway does not propagate any anthropocentric approach, these nonhuman beings come across as dynamic characters who could champion an ecofeminist critique. This paper has attempted such an ecofeminist critique. However, Hemingway himself never propagates such a critique through *The Old Man and the Sea*. He has simply canvassed an unbiased, open-minded story of human relationships with nature. His liberal-humanist approach towards Santiago never portrays him as derogatory. Santiago's biases are part of his consciousness due to his historical position and Hemingway has expressed these through his unbiased narration. This paper has highlighted these biases, the challenges offered to them by

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nonhuman beings and the ensuing ambiguity in him. It shows how the nonhuman space can work to unravel the complexities in human life and the ecosystem and jettison a balanced lifestyle. Hence, this paper reveals how Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* can be understood as an ecofeminist critique of Santiago's biases and can work as a tool to challenge and de-stabilize them. By tracing Santiago's interactions with the sea, the marlin, and other nonhuman entities, this paper argues that the novella not only reveals the fragility of patriarchal constructs but also gestures toward a more reciprocal and decentered understanding of human-nature relationships.

In conclusion, *The Old Man and the Sea* can be read as a critique of the masculinist impulse to dominate nature. Santiago's worldview, groomed by patriarchy and anthropocentrism, fails to contain the complexity and autonomous agency of the nonhuman world around him. His journey reveals not the triumph of man over nature, but the inevitable unravelling of such a delusion. The sea, the marlin, the birds, and even the sharks assert their own agencies, refusing to be mere backdrops to Santiago's quest. In doing so, the narrative echoes ecofeminist calls to rethink humanity's relationship with the natural world, urging a move away from conquest and control toward humility and interconnection. By reading the text through an ecofeminist lens, one uncovers a deeper ecological consciousness that challenges the very ideals the novella is often said to uphold.

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Bio-note

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